

The Black Poet and the Poet of the Blacks: Exploring Personal Identity and Collective Heritage in Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

"My greatest ambition is to be the poet of the Blacks. The Black poet. Do you understand?" (Guillén 56). This was Langston Hughes's emphatic comment to the Cuban poet, Nicolás Guillén, during a conversation in 1929 after Hughes described his travels to Africa. Speaking of the deep kinship he felt with the Africans due to a shared history of suffering, this declarative statement and earnest appeal to understanding assert Hughes's creative mission and draw attention to his individual identity as a "Black poet," as well as his intention to represent a people: "the Blacks." The importance of forging a new, authentically racial art was also outlined in Hughes's manifesto, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*. In this work, however, the primary challenge that Hughes presents for the Negro artist is that of defining the black self within American culture. His critique of another young poet's attempt to "run spiritually from his race" is rooted in a nationalistic call to recast the mold of black art in the United States (Hughes 806). Hughes goes on to acknowledge that he also encounters problems from within his own race as African-American readers question his own racial heritage, asking "Why do you write about black people? You aren't black" (807). It is important to note here that Hughes had white, French and Cherokee ancestry and so was a light-skinned African American (Lamb 134).

Evidently, there was an intersection of different aims and perspectives in the figure of Hughes. In his effort to craft a new art, Hughes used poetry to create a voice for a previously silenced race, and to bear witness to the collective history of an oppressed group in the United States. At the same time, several of his poems, such as "Mulatto," dealt with the conflicted identity of the individual African American; Hughes was acutely aware that

many personal histories bore the “red stain of bastardy,” which another contemporary critic, W.E.B. DuBois, described as a “hereditary weight” hanging over the African-American identity (536). Underlying his representations of both individual and collective identity, then, we find Hughes's preoccupation with recovering lost origins and finding answers to the same recurring questions: where am I from? What people do I belong to? How does this affect others' perception of me and, importantly, my self-perception? In this regard, Hughes believed that poetry had a critical role in reshaping the self-perception of the black race. He seemed to be inspired by this conviction from the time he was a teenager, when he wrote “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and used natural imagery to infuse the memories of a single Negro with the spirit of an ennobling collective heritage.

Written when he was only seventeen years old in dedication to W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” has become Hughes's most well-known poem and a definitive text in the African-American literary canon. The title of the poem immediately prepares the reader to listen to a distinctly black voice: “The Negro *Speaks*” (my italics). The definite article preceding “Negro,” (as opposed to an indefinite “A”), suggests that a particular individual perspective will be adopted in the poem, and the first pronouncement, “I’ve known rivers,” establishes a tone of recollection and self-knowledge. As the poem progresses, however, no details are given of the speaker, and the abstract nature of his comments indicates that he represents an entire race as he begins to describe the mystical connections that rivers of memory have created within him and his people.

The river is the central metaphor that encapsulates Hughes's exploration of a rich and expansive history for black people—a history which reaches far beyond the degrading experience of slavery that had continually marred African-American narratives up until that point. Of course, the association of rivers with the transportation of slaves is unavoidable. Interpreting the poem as a reaction to the memory of slavery, Glenn Jordan has noted that the Mississippi River was a “key artery in the internal slave trade” and that the phrase “sold down the river” was still plangent in African-American memory (865-6). Hughes himself describes how the poem evolved out of a recollection of Abraham Lincoln's travels down the Mississippi where he saw “slavery at its worst” (Kelley 82-3). Lincoln's trip to New

Orleans is referred to explicitly in the poem (7-8) and this reference is significant because it is commonly thought that Lincoln witnessed a slave auction during this visit, which then deepened his hatred of slavery (Cox 454).

Crucially, however, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” only summons the Mississippi River to mind after meandering through a list of international rivers: the Euphrates, the Congo, and the Nile. The speaker's imagination and stirring self-discovery therefore extends further back than the annals of American history and the memory of slavery. Each of the three aforementioned rivers are important as centers of culture and growth for the Babylonian, African and Egyptian civilizations respectively. Although rivers would eventually carry African Americans to a life of subjugation and suffering on the North American continent, Hughes reminds readers that rivers were once a powerful and constructive force that literally carved the landscape and nurtured the development of life wherever they flowed. The Euphrates, for instance, is geographically located in the Fertile Crescent, which is regarded as the birthplace of civilization. Cultural hearths have also typically been named after rivers, such as the Nile River Valley. The surging of these life-giving waters in the consciousness of the Negro implies the vital role that the black race has had in shaping life on this planet, and suffuses their heritage with the beauty and dignity associated with ancient cultures.

A simple and powerful atavism is embraced in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and the positive identification of the African American with the constructive force of the river is clear from the verbs that follow the personal pronoun. The images are primitive and yet empowering; the Negro bathes, builds and raises (4-6). He is lifted out of the historical mire of suffering and illumined as an active agent in the creation of human culture, not just the passive recipient of a dark fate that history has doled out to him. The verbs then shift to those of witnessing, such as looking, hearing, and seeing, which, as T.S. McMillin highlights, establish Hughes as “a spokesperson” for his people (37).

As a spokesperson, Hughes uses his pen to excavate the historical landscape and to reveal black identity as a forgotten life-vein of humanity. In the process, there emerges “a deeply embedded memory of freedom” (Oktenberg). Although critics have disagreed over

the exclusivity of the racial references in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” (Joyce A. Joyce concludes that “the flow of blood in human veins” specifically identifies the “blackness” of the poet with the first humans, whereas George Hutchinson argues that the poet returns to a “pre-racial dawn”), the symbol of the river nevertheless allows Hughes to create a sense of belonging in the dislocated and disconnected African American. This belonging transcends notions of enslavement and ownership by the whites; it is a spiritually fortifying feeling that the Negro is a part of every people and everything, that the blood which flows in his veins connects him to ancient knowledge and spirit. The black self not only extends outwards to connect previously disparate aspects of individual identity and collective heritage, but it also grows deep. Indeed, the repetition of the line “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” at the end of the poem mirrors the lyrical, lulling quality of the river, and suggests the capacity of the black race to endure, to persevere and to reemerge with greater wisdom and strength. The repetition in the poem also allows for the image of the rivers to resurface with different connotations. By the end of the poem, we realize that rivers not only stand for the creation of life, but for its continuation in spite of hardship.

In this light, the transformation of the “muddy” river into a “golden” streak towards the end of the poem can be likened to Hughes's own creative act in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Hughes illumines the history of African Americans afresh in this poem. He recovers the grandeur and mystery of their origins as they have risen and fallen in different times and places around the world and resurfaced through all their suffering. He holds his finger on the black pulse and traces its throbbing movement past the Civil War, past the secret terrors and shameful corruption on the plantations, past the slave ships that sailed along the Mississippi, and into a mystical network of global arteries that connects the black individual to the rest of humanity and endows his soul with the deep wisdom born of suffering and survival. Little did Langston Hughes know that with his composition of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” at the age of seventeen, he had already become “the poet of the Blacks.”

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